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Social development, including questions relating to the world social situation and to youth, ageing, disabled persons and the family

Follow-up to the outcome of the Millennium Summit

Revitalization of the work of the General Assembly

Review of the efficiency of the administrative and financial functioning of the United Nations

Summary report of the 2011 parliamentary hearing

Note by the President of the General Assembly

The present document contains the summary of the 2011 parliamentary hearing held in New York on 28 and 29 November 2011, which is circulated pursuant to General Assembly resolution 65/123 (see annex).

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Annex

Strengthening political accountability for a more peaceful and prosperous world

Parliamentary hearing at the United Nations: summary and main conclusions

1. The 2011 parliamentary hearing was held at United Nations Headquarters on 28 and 29 November 2011. It was attended by over 180 parliamentarians and their professional staff from some 50 countries, as well as representatives of several regional parliamentary assemblies.

Opening remarks

2. The parliamentary hearing was addressed by the President of the General Assembly, Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser, the Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations, Asha-Rose Migiro, and the Vice-President of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), A. Alonso Díaz-Caneja. Mr. Al-Nasser underscored the role of IPU in ensuring that parliaments provided direct input into the work of the United Nations and in helping to translate global commitments into national legislation and policies. He encouraged delegates to familiarize themselves with the decisions of the General Assembly and to help implement them at the national level. Ms. Migiro emphasized the need for parliamentarians to be accountable to their constituents by, inter alia, ensuring that people's voices were heard and by respecting the rules of democratic institutions. A former parliamentarian herself, she argued that it was parliamentarians who must be the frontline defenders of democratic governance and constitutionality. Mr. Díaz-Caneja reminded the delegates that consultations with Member States would soon begin to pave the way for a forthcoming debate in the General Assembly on how to further strengthen interaction between the United Nations, national parliaments and IPU. The outcome of those debates should boost the efforts of parliaments to ensure that national Governments were accountable to both citizens at home and the international community at large.[a]

3. The discussion was structured around four topics of particular relevance to the current global context, in which political accountability played a key role:

(a) The role of the General Assembly in strengthening global accountability;

(b) Youth participation in the democratic process: challenges and opportunities;

(c) Accountability in the management of public funds: good practices and model legislation for budget transparency;

(d) Strengthening the links between national institutions and civil society: towards more open societies.

[a] The full texts of the opening statements, along with the list of participants and related documentation, can be found on the IPU website at www.ipu.org/Splz-e/unga11.htm.

Session I. The role of the General Assembly in strengthening global accountability

Panellists: Mélégué Traoré, former Speaker of the National Assembly of Burkina Faso and Acting President of the IPU Committee on United Nations Affairs; Oscar Fernández-Taranco, Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs, United Nations; Camillo Gonsalves, Permanent Representative of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines to the United Nations and outgoing co-Chair of the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Revitalization of the General Assembly; Cora Weiss, President, the Hague Appeal for Peace; and Barbara Crossette, former foreign correspondent and Bureau Chief, *The New York Times*, who acted as moderator.

4. Mr. Traoré brought to bear the point of view of the IPU Committee on United Nations Affairs while Mr. Fernández-Taranco offered a perspective from within the United Nations Secretariat, referring in particular to the recent adoption of a General Assembly resolution on mediation. Ambassador Gonsalves provided some food for thought on the accountability of the General Assembly and Ms. Weiss examined the issue from the civil society standpoint. Their presentations and the subsequent discussion are summarized below.

5. Over the years, many Member States had expressed regret that the General Assembly seemed to be "losing ground" to the Security Council and criticized the latter's "encroachment". It had therefore been very heartening to see that in recent years the Assembly had acquired newfound relevance with an impressive record of ground-breaking achievements, reaffirming its position as the world's premier standard-setting body. Examples were the seminal World Summit Outcome in 2005 and the endorsement by the Assembly of the responsibility to protect, and the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy of 2006. More recently, the Assembly succeeded where the Security Council had failed just a few weeks earlier, namely in condemning the brutal crackdown in the Syrian Arab Republic. The latest example of the Assembly's newfound relevance on peace and security issues was its adoption of resolution 65/283 entitled "Strengthening the role of mediation in the peaceful settlement of disputes, conflict prevention and resolution", which would be discussed later in the meeting.

6. In spite of those improvements, the complexities of the issues addressed by the General Assembly prevented it from being as effective as it was designed to be, and there was only limited accountability for its failure to find adequate solutions to problems that could only be solved at a global level. Its responses to three of the more critical issues facing the international community in recent times — climate change, the economic crisis and the Arab Spring — had been deficient or were non-existent. The climate change debate had morphed into an endless series of meetings at exotic venues, where process trumped substance and even the most watered-down agreements remained unimplemented. The United Nations had held a major conference on the economic crisis in 2009, but the prescriptions contained in its consensus outcome document were promptly ignored. Other than the one on the Syrian Arab Republic, the Assembly had adopted no meaningful resolution on any aspect of the Arab Spring.

7. A major challenge to the effectiveness of the General Assembly, and therefore to its accountability to its global community as the only global forum for decision-

making, was that Member States could seek alternative platforms for finding solutions, which might not entail a truly global approach. For small States, the Assembly remained the primary, and sometimes the only, forum for multilateral engagement, one where they are guaranteed a seat at the table. On the other hand, if larger countries were dissatisfied with the General Assembly as a forum, they could afford to take their concerns elsewhere: to the Group of Twenty, the Security Council or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. They could deal with climate change issues unilaterally or in non-representative groups, as had occurred in Copenhagen in 2009. Part of the problem lay in the fact that in the General Assembly, where each country, whatever its size, had one vote, the developed countries were disadvantaged and outnumbered, and therefore had turned to other, more limited, forums where they maintained their influence.

8. The General Assembly had tried to address its weaknesses, inter alia, by creating the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Revitalization of the General Assembly. However, progress in the Working Group had been hindered by a fundamental disagreement on the nature of the problem. The developed countries saw the issue as a procedural one, to be resolved by measures such as starting meetings on time and distributing documents electronically, while the developing countries saw it as a political process whose principal objective must be to strengthen the role of the Assembly as the main deliberative body at the United Nations, resisting the encroachment of the Security Council or other bodies. Efforts to enhance the accountability of the General Assembly must therefore be accompanied by a clearer delineation of the respective roles and responsibilities of the Assembly and other bodies, and of who was accountable to whom.

9. The gulf that separated the undertaking of international commitments and their implementation at the national level was one of the main difficulties facing the General Assembly, and thus the United Nations as a whole. A major shortcoming in the effectiveness of the Assembly, and consequently its accountability to the whole body it represented, was that it had no means of obliging individual Governments that had voted in favour of a resolution to actually implement it, and no way of imposing a timetable for an adopted resolution to be turned into reality. Bridging that gulf was a matter of political will and national buy-in. International commitments were by definition binding on Governments, but they really only took hold when all stakeholders felt involved and were able to play their role. For that to happen, stakeholders needed to understand the various implications of the commitments undertaken and the measures needed to help Governments honour the pledges they had made.

> Every parliamentarian present here has experiences and innovations to share. Importantly, you also have at your fingertips the practical tools to realize our common goals. Each of you, therefore, has a responsibility and critical role to play in building global prosperity.
>
> Abdulaziz Al-Nasser
> President of the General Assembly

10. Thus, the General Assembly was at a crossroads. It had the legitimacy of universal membership and a mandate under the Charter of the United Nations that encompassed a wide variety of subject areas. But that legitimacy was being undercut by the increasingly inefficient manner in which the Assembly operated, by the encroachment of other bodies on its functions and by the fact that many resolutions, even those adopted by consensus, remained unimplemented.

11. In comparison with national legislatures, political accountability in the General Assembly was fragmented and indirect. Membership of the Assembly was not the result of direct elections, and delegates were answerable to the capitals of 193 different countries. That did not make the Assembly unaccountable, but neither did it absolve parliaments of their role in ensuring its accountability; on the contrary, there was much that parliamentarians could do. Through their policymaking and oversight roles and their power of the purse, they could exercise significant influence over the positions and actions of their Governments at the United Nations and ensure the adoption of appropriate mechanisms to effectively implement United Nations resolutions and treaties at the national level.

12. The role of national parliaments was crucial in raising the profile of international issues domestically, as well as in ensuring that the international commitments their Governments undertook reflected the national debates and interests and were subsequently implemented. To do that, it was important that parliaments should have a committee dealing with United Nations affairs, which must remain abreast of what the country's envoys to the United Nations were doing. If necessary, those representatives should be called to report to the committee.

13. Parliamentarians must also take a much more active interest both in the revitalization of the General Assembly and the reform of the Security Council, efforts intended to make both bodies more transparent with a more responsive and activist agenda. Those issues should be discussed at the parliamentary level and the outcome should feed into the United Nations process in a more meaningful manner. Very often, the deliberations at the United Nations were a matter of balancing the interests of the larger countries. However, parliaments could bring a more people-centred approach to the deliberations, which would be particularly useful and might in fact make the decisions of the Assembly more attractive and therefore more implementable.

14. For parliaments to be able to do so, they must be informed about and engaged in issues relevant to the United Nations. That was why meetings such as the annual parliamentary hearing at the United Nations were so important. It was a welcome development that parliamentarians were now routinely included in national delegations to major United Nations meetings and conferences. The Secretary-General, taking the lead, regularly addressed national parliaments in the course of his travels. Similarly, representatives of the United Nations away from Headquarters should actively engage parliaments.

15. As permanent representatives reported to the foreign ministry, that ministry should distribute to other relevant ministries the resolutions being voted on. The resolutions should be posted on websites, in the national language(s) and easily accessible to the public, together with an explanation of the vote and a schedule of the actions planned at the country level to implement the resolutions. Also, a mechanism similar to the universal periodic review conducted by the Human Rights Council should be developed for General Assembly resolutions, with Member States

coming before their peers to report on what they had done to implement them. To help give a strong parliamentary dimension to United Nations activities, in 2007 IPU member parliaments decided to create a Committee on United Nations Affairs. That body met once a year, offering a framework for direct interaction between parliamentarians and high-level United Nations representatives and for parliamentary input to the major international conferences and summits.

> The problem is that the General Assembly has no muscle to enforce its resolutions.
>
> Janós Horváth
> Doyen of the Parliament of Hungary

16. Over the years, the General Assembly had adopted by consensus a number of resolutions on cooperation between the United Nations, national parliaments and IPU, reflecting a growing will to go beyond traditional practice and favour an integrated, dialogue-based approach. That, in turn, would ensure a parliamentary perspective in the debates on major international challenges and boost buy-in with respect to international commitments. In its resolution 65/123, the General Assembly decided more systematically to engage with the Inter-Parliamentary Union in organizing a parliamentary component of major United Nations deliberative processes. That very ambitious resolution opened up a host of new prospects.

17. Dissenting voices argued that placing the onus for the implementation of United Nations resolutions on parliamentarians was not realistic. A resolution calling for a moratorium on the death penalty was cited as an example: if parliamentarians had campaigned during elections for capital punishment, would they seriously try to make their Government implement the resolution? If parliamentarians genuinely believed that in the present economic climate their Government could not afford to do so, how active were they going to be in urging Government to comply with the resolution calling for fulfilment of the pledge to provide 0.7 per cent of gross domestic product as official development assistance? Moreover, at the practical level, should the obligation to implement resolutions apply only to those adopted by consensus, only to those for which a country had actually voted, or to all of them?

18. All the suggested means of ensuring accountability begged the question of what Member States wanted the General Assembly to be. Should it take a maximalist approach, claiming for itself all the functions enumerated in the Charter and excluding other groupings, or a more moderate approach, leaving space for other bodies to act in their areas of expertise? Member States themselves had to make that decision; however, there again was a divide between the developed countries, which saw the issue as being procedural, and the developing ones, which thought that there were fundamental philosophical issues to be resolved.

19. In parallel with its consideration of the issue of accountability for General Assembly resolutions in general, the parliamentary hearing paid specific attention to resolution 65/283, which had been adopted only four months previously. Participants considered how parliaments could contribute to the implementation of

that important new commitment. In the resolution, the Assembly acknowledged the growing interest in and provision of mediation, as well as the need for cooperation among the actors involved in a specific mediation context, and encouraged Member States to develop national mediation capacities, as applicable, and to promote the equal, full and effective participation of women in all forums and at all levels of the peaceful settlement of disputes.

20. The Assembly requested the Secretary-General to submit a report on the implementation of the resolution and to develop guidance for more effective mediation. To that end, the Secretary-General would be holding a broad consultation process with Member States and civil society. The United Nations strongly encouraged parliaments, through IPU and national Governments, to contribute to that process.

21. Violence prevention depended on the ability of civil society to organize. It depended on local peace committees, peace education, working for non-violent elections and using home-grown methods of conflict resolution. Parliamentarians should call on their ministries of education to integrate peace education into school curricula, covering human rights, gender equality, sustainable development, social and economic justice, disarmament and traditional peace practices.

22. The existing United Nations-IPU framework of partnership should help operationalize the resolution. IPU could help by calling on parliamentarians to volunteer for the roster of well-trained and geographically diverse experts to act as mediators. A mechanism might be developed for ensuring the involvement of women in mediation, similar to the processes adopted with great success by IPU to promote the participation of women parliamentarians in national delegations to the General Assembly.

23. The following were the key findings of session I:

- Effective oversight requires concrete mechanisms to institutionalize the process of continuous interaction between national parliaments and their Governments around decisions of the General Assembly. A case in point is the groundbreaking resolution on mediation, in the implementation of which parliaments can play an active role. Such mechanisms could include parliamentary committees on United Nations affairs, regular hearings with the country's ambassador to the United Nations and requiring foreign ministries to forward all resolutions adopted by the Assembly to parliament for review.
- In order to fulfil their oversight role, parliaments must be able to go beyond their internal tensions and hold Governments to account for their decisions on the international stage.
- IPU plays a crucial role in facilitating parliaments' involvement by means of practices that only a few years ago were considered unthinkable, such as inviting members of parliament to join their national delegations to United Nations conferences, holding parliamentary hearings on specific issues or facilitating contact between parliaments and the United Nations operations in their own country.

Session II. Youth participation in the democratic process: challenges and opportunities

Panellists: Farroq Hamid Naek, Chairman of the Senate of Pakistan; Jean-Francis Zinsou, Permanent Representative of Benin to the United Nations; Daniela Bas, Director of the Division for Social Policy and Development, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations; Sena Hussein, Online Community Manager, Global Youth Action Network/TakingItGlobal; Abderrahim Foukara, Bureau Chief, Al Jazeera, acting as moderator.

24. At the session, Mr. Naek outlined how Pakistan was trying to encourage young people to become involved in politics and said that they had played a defining role in the revival of democracy in Pakistan in 2008. Ambassador Zinsou discussed the position of youth in the politics of the developing world and also referred to the findings of the High-level Meeting of the General Assembly on Youth: Dialogue and Mutual Understanding, held in July 2011, at which he had served as co-facilitator of the outcome document. Ms. Bas described the approach to youth political participation taken by the Division for Social Policy and Development and, like Ambassador Zinsou, spoke of the benefits drawn from the World Programme of Action for Youth. Ms. Hussein described her organization's interactions with young people involved in various non-traditional political actions around the world.

25. Young people's potential contributions to parliamentary democracy must be encouraged through investment in capacity-building. That must include empowering young people by providing greater access to human development opportunities, for which both the executive and the parliament bore responsibility. The High-level Meeting on Youth had come to the conclusion that the youth policies and strategies adopted to date had yielded uneven results, in part because of the negative economic and social consequences of globalization and climate change. Unemployment among youth, even educated and well-qualified youth, accounted for much of their frustration. The choices made by decision makers were not neutral: they could either benefit or disadvantage young people. The High-level Meeting recognized the responsibility of the United Nations to guide the activities of States seeking to promote policies to overcome the obstacles to the full development of young people. The Secretary-General had been entrusted with making recommendations to improve youth-related United Nations programmes and structures and with developing a set of indicators associated with the World Programme of Action for Youth aimed at helping States evaluate young people's situation and gauge the performance of youth-related policies.

26. It was undeniable, and regrettable, that the voice of young people, who had a legitimate and important role to play in society, was not adequately heard and that their contribution to society was not recognized. Most unfortunate of all was that young people today were perceived as being incapable of making decisions on their own, with the result that their contribution to decision-making processes was minimal. Parliaments must take significant strides towards promoting partnership between youth and the legislative process, which could help groom the politicians of the future. Political awareness generated a sense of responsibility among young people and empowered them to make informed decisions about their choice of Government.

27. In the discussion that followed, there was broad agreement that in most countries, young people were turning away from traditional political processes, understood to be partisan politics, election campaigns and voting. However, there was considerable disagreement among participants on the value of some of the unconventional actions being taken by young people instead.

> We can no longer only include the types of youth voices that we want to hear. We need to include the ones that are fighting to be heard.
>
> Sena Hussein

28. Young people were expressing their political stance, their conviction that current models of society had failed, using two, often related, avenues: expressions of opinion on electronic media and social networks; and direct action in the streets, as seen in the "occupy" movements in the United States of America and elsewhere, the *indignados* movements in Spain and Latin America, the Arab Spring and some events in London.

29. There was consensus that several of the direct-action movements around the world were highly political expressions of frustration with conventional processes. For many young people, those processes did not seem to offer a way to express their discontent with the world as it was, with the inequalities they saw around them and by which they were disproportionally affected and, notably, with the damage that was being done to the environment. It was suggested that the young people who were turning away from conventional political processes might not be expressing a disdain for the concept of politics per se but rather an intense desire to see politics working in a different way, going beyond its traditional boundaries.

> There is a difference between youth action in the developed and the developing world, with many of the facilities on offer in the countries of the North — computers, Internet, social media, smartphones — not being nearly so freely available in the South.
>
> Farroq Hamid Naek

30. Various reasons were advanced for youth's current disenchantment with traditional political processes. One very fundamental explanation was simple ignorance of how such processes were intended to work. If traditional parliamentary processes seemed obscure and opaque to young people, they would not be able to imagine how they could use those processes to change the structure of a world they perceived as unjust. That was even more true in those countries where parliaments did not have a real political role, but merely rubber-stamped Government decisions. Youth would question how such parliaments could empower them when they themselves were lacking in power. Noting, too, the lack of young people in traditional political institutions, they would wonder what possible interest such institutions could have to their concerns and in solving them. Other speakers felt that young people had turned their back on the traditional mechanisms because they

perceived that even in advanced democracies, the whole process had been skewed to the benefit of a small elite.

31. Several possible remedies for the situation were discussed. In Pakistan, for example, Youth Parliament Pakistan served as a valuable forum for the expression of young people's views about a range of national and international issues. The debates in the Youth Parliament were intended not only to help young members in their personal development as citizens, but also to allow for their views on vital issues facing the nation to be articulated and conveyed to the Government. A number of other projects were in the pipeline to mainstream youth into events concerning national development, democratization, social harmony and progress. Pakistan had also initiated a national internship programme to encourage youth involvement in public sector organizations.

32. Representatives of other countries described their own youth parliaments or similar institutions. Other approaches tried and tested in various countries included presentations by parliamentarians and political workshops at schools and colleges to nurture and promote the democratic ideal, and internships and junior office positions within parliaments. At the global level, consideration was being given to the best way systematically to involve young people in the work of the United Nations. The Division for Social Policy and Development participated in internship and Junior Professional Officer programmes within the Secretariat. There might also be opportunities for young people to be part of delegations to the General Assembly, whether as young parliamentarians or young people not (yet) involved in the political process.

> Do not give us the pulpit if all you really want to do is abate your privileged guilt by hearing us speak or parading us around in NGOs or youth cabinets. That will only make us want to hit back and fight for these substantive changes without your cooperation.
>
> London demonstrator, quoted by Sena Hussein

33. The overriding aim was to create political awareness among youth, leading to a sense of political responsibility. The first stage was simply to instil awareness and knowledge of how politics, or governance at its various levels, actually worked. The desire to participate, it was hoped, would then follow. Even in remote rural areas, political awareness among young people could be fostered, for example by using traditional itinerant storytellers to impart concepts of civics, democracy and politics. Implementation of the World Programme of Action for Youth had been found to provide tools and guidance that enabled young people to become more active and capable political actors.

34. Political institutions also had to be prepared to make adjustments. If politics-averse youth, who evidently had strongly felt concerns about their society, were to be brought back into the ambit of traditional parliamentary processes, parliaments throughout the world would need to examine their procedures with a view to making them more accessible and less obscure to the young. It was up to parliamentarians and other politicians to take the first step. A second necessary adjustment was for traditional political authorities to recognize that the street movements were a

legitimate political expression, not something to be simply suppressed by the security forces acting at the behest of the established order. Similarly, the social media and networks being used by young people to voice their views should be regarded as legitimate forms of free expression, not something to be censored and forced out of existence, and certainly not to be shut down with transparent excuse of combating online piracy. It might be disturbing to some Governments to think of such a world of free-floating ideas beyond censorship or control, but they had a duty to recognize that such forums came under the concept of freedom of expression, which they were duty-bound to uphold.

35. In many places, politicians and Government officials ought to rethink their approach to youth, seeing young people as an opportunity instead of a problem. Engaging with the ideas of youth could invigorate democracies, spur innovation and create societies which were more responsive to all citizens. However, as political institutions sought to involve more young people in their activities, they needed to guard against taking an approach that could be interpreted as tokenism. If such institutions had originally been built on the premise that youth had no active role to play, then simply reserving a token number of seats for young people was inadequate. Instead, the fundamental understanding of such institutions needed to change. Radical young people would be prepared to cooperate with traditional political institutions if the latter allowed them space to realize their aspirations to liberty, dignity and equity. Young people did not wish to remain on the sidelines or to act as mere foot soldiers for political parties; they wanted to be counted among the decision makers.

36. The following were the key findings of session II:

- Addressing solely the issue of decline in youth participation in traditional forms of political participation during elections and in political parties will not suffice to effectively include youth in democratic processes. It has to be understood that economic and social exclusion is not only a basis for demands for change among youth around the world, but that economic and social exclusion also impedes participation.

- In order to find workable solutions to the diverse problems that individual countries are facing, political leaders must not only involve young people in the decision-making processes but must build partnerships with them. More importantly, young people have to feel that their participation in political processes can make a difference; this is only possible in democracies where parliaments effectively fulfil their oversight roles.

- Some practical steps that parliaments can take to increase traditional forms of political participation among youth include mandatory voting and parliamentary quota systems, which in turn could motivate young people to become more involved in politics. However, parliament might not be the appropriate platform for change; youth participation must start within parties to create a different political culture.

- As long as political institutions that have led to the exclusion of youth remain unchanged, political inclusion will remain tokenism and cannot lead to real change. Political leaders need to think "outside the box" and learn to understand the language and processes that are used by young people. Practical steps to achieve this include e-voting and the use of blogs by members of

parliament to communicate more effectively with their constituents, in particular young people.

Session III. Accountability in the management of public funds: good practices and model legislation for budget transparency

Panellists: Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe; Ivonne Passada, former Speaker of the House of Representatives of Uruguay; Jim McLay, Permanent Representative of New Zealand to the United Nations; Angela Kane, Under-Secretary-General for Management, United Nations; Vivek Ramkumar, Manager, Open Budget Initiative, International Budget Partnership; Peter Rajsingh, Gallatin School of Individualized Study and Stern School of Business, New York University, acting as moderator.

37. At the session, Mr. Çavuşoğlu spoke from the perspective of the Council of Europe, while Ms. Passada offered reflections from her region. Ms. Kane described the budget process at the United Nations, Mr. Ramkumar outlined the views of civil society and Ambassador McLay shared insights gained from his involvement in budget issues in his different capacities as a lawyer, a politician, an investment banker and, most recently, a diplomat.

38. Many developed countries had entered a vicious circle. Years of imprudent spending and living beyond their means had eroded national capacity to maintain living standards and invest in a better future. Worse, the vicious circle was also eroding national sovereignty in a number of countries as foreign creditors aggressively claimed their due, and the spectre of insolvency could not be ruled out. At the same time, duly elected officials were losing control of decisions regarding fiscal, monetary and economic policies as those decisions were increasingly becoming matters discussed in unelected bureaucracies. Consequently, many countries were now under pressure to impose fiscal austerity and reduce their debt burdens. Whether such measures were fully justified depended on each country's macroeconomic situation. In any case, people would only accept austerity measures if they felt that funds were well spent and that appropriate accountability systems were in place.

39. There was a growing demand by the citizenry worldwide for greater accountability in their Government's budget processes. Gradually, and to varying extents in different countries, Governments were responding to those demands, thereby enabling the creation of budgets that were in line not only with the political purposes of the Government but also the social needs of the populace. Parliaments had an important role to play in bringing that process to fruition. Uruguay was the only country in Latin America with a five-year budget, i.e., one that spanned the entire term of a Government. In each of those five years, parliament undertook an evaluation of the budget. However, improvements were needed, particularly in assessing the return on investments made. Research had shown that countries whose budgets were closely scrutinized and evaluated by independent bodies demonstrated improved social development in comparison with others. Examples in Latin America included Brazil, Chile and Costa Rica. However, in numerous other countries of the region, the highest audit institution was subordinate to the executive branch, which undermined the necessary objectivity of that institution. Where there were no

independent audits of State accounts, parliaments should put in place the necessary legal framework to provide for them. In addition, parliamentarians should strive to enhance transparency in public procurement and, where applicable, privatization processes. That could be done by establishing appropriate codes of conduct and adopting legislation on conflicts of interest and corruption.

40. The budget process of the United Nations was highly transparent. The regular budget of the United Nations was US$ 2.2 billion (not including the peacekeeping budget, which was some US$ 8 billion) and it was subject to scrutiny by Member States, which were the conduit for further public involvement. In the budget planning cycle for each biennium, a strategic framework was derived from legislative mandates, which was the basis for formulating the programme budget. A number of intergovernmental expert bodies deliberated on all the steps of that complex process, including the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions, the Committee for Programme and Coordination and the Fifth Committee of the General Assembly. Lastly, the General Assembly, the plenary of all 193 Member States, adopted the budget.

41. The full involvement of Member States in all aspects of the budget process ensured transparency. Furthermore, the United Nations was currently working to further strengthen accountability in the system, the overall aim being to put in place a model that effectively linked political accountability (Member States) with personal accountability (senior managers) and managerial accountability (management and staff). Relevant tools included the financial disclosure policy that covered all senior managers and those involved in financial and procurement-related decision-making — over 3,500 staff — and the newly launched online contributions portal that allowed all Member States to see the level of their respective contributions in real time. In addition, the United Nations was in the process of introducing the International Public Sector Accounting Standards to ensure that it was following current best practices.

42. However, the disadvantage of the very comprehensive budget system was that there was in fact too much information available. In the current budget cycle, for example, 344 documents had been issued, a staggering total of 6,499 pages. Moreover, Member States could also ask questions about any aspect of the budget, and in 2011, over 1,000 pages had been issued in response. An overriding problem was that once a mandate existed, Member States would never allow it to be cancelled: no committee was ever dissolved, no function ever terminated.

43. The United Nations budget process therefore needed to be rethought in its entirety, to become more strategic and focused, with a greater emphasis on results and with far less micromanagement. The Secretary-General had called for an overhaul in order to streamline the process by having a single United Nations budget document containing all the salient facts and figures but far shorter than what was currently produced. By supporting those recommendations in their respective jurisdictions, parliaments could help create more transparency and accountability in the management of public funds at the United Nations.

44. Public finances tended to be scrutinized much more closely than company accounts and there were ways to strengthen oversight. There was room in the audit process for private sector auditors to examine specific Government agencies, even though the overall audit of the Government's finances should remain in the hands of a public sector auditor. An important role, but one in need of improvement, was that

of the media. Generally speaking, the media did not do a good job of scrutinizing public expenditure, relying basically on parliamentarians to expose problems, which they in turn publicized. A third important aspect of accountability in the management of public funds required whistle-blowers and legislation to protect them.

45. The multi-stakeholder Global Initiative for Fiscal Transparency had recently been created to advance the development of global standards. At present, the initiative included the Governments of Brazil, the Philippines, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the United States of America, as well as international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank and civil society organizations such as ONE, an advocacy and campaigning organization, and Greenpeace International. The International Budget Partnership had informed the leadership of the Inter-Parliamentary Union about the initiative and would welcome the active engagement of IPU and its member parliaments.

46. The Open Budget Index had been developed by the International Budget Partnership in response to difficulties faced by its membership in obtaining accurate information on Government budgets. Countries were ranked according to the availability of eight key budget reports and the comprehensiveness of the data, and the results were published in the Open Budget Survey.[b] The survey also assessed the extent of effective oversight provided by legislatures and audit institutions.

47. Governments should develop multiple forums for public engagement in budget matters, including drawing on existing mechanisms such as participatory budgeting and social auditing. Prior to any consultation, they should issue notifications about opportunities for public participation so that citizens could be prepared to provide input. Governments should issue reports on the input received through public consultations and report on how it had been addressed in budget decision-making.

48. There was a need for a new budget transparency standard. While several standards existed, such as the Best Practices for Budget Transparency of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development published in 2000 and the 2007 IMF Code of Good Practices on Fiscal Transparency, or those developed by civil society organizations, they were inconsistent and contradictory. Moreover, they did not attribute sufficient weight to the oversight role of parliament.

49. Some speakers expressed the view that a global budget transparency standard should not be coercive because the degree of appropriate budgetary openness would vary from country to country. The United Nations and IPU should play a leading role in creating such a standard by promoting the participation of international organizations and civil society in order to gather best practices and promote experience-sharing among parliaments at the regional and international levels, with meaningful engagement by all stakeholders. Any new global budget transparency standard should be relevant for all countries. One way of achieving that aim would be to take a graduated approach, in which different standards were created for countries at different stages in the development of budget transparency practices. Such a norm should also underscore the role of legislatures and audit institutions.

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[b] Available from internationalbudget.org.

> A key challenge facing civil society organizations and legislatures is getting access to timely, comprehensive and high-quality information on Government budgets.
>
> Vivek Ramkumar

50. A legislative framework such as the New Zealand Fiscal Responsibility Act, stipulating how the economy should be managed over an economic cycle, was seen to be a highly desirable instrument for ensuring public scrutiny of Government budgeting. Another key legislative instrument was freedom of information laws that could be invoked if Governments were reluctant to open their budgeting to scrutiny. It was suggested that Governments should be compelled to make some form of presentation of the public accounts in a format that would be understandable by both parliamentarians and the wider public.

51. Some parliamentarians regretted that their public accounts committees and audit offices lacked independence and resources. That had a serious impact on the quality of audit reports, making it difficult for the public or for parliamentarians to evaluate accountability. In addition, many parliaments lacked the legal authority or power to make effective changes to national budgets or the budgetary process, for example to provide sufficient time for the legislature to discuss pre-budget policy statements and to scrutinize the final executive budget proposals.

> Why does the United Nations continue with such an archaic process? Because Member States are not willing to change it. We have made proposals to make the process more user-friendly, in part by building on the good practices of other international organizations, but so far those changes have been resisted.
>
> Angela Kane

52. The Government had a duty to inform the public about how to understand the budget and to provide all the information needed for citizens to have a firm grasp of what was at stake. The Government also had a responsibility not to constantly change the way the budget was presented, which could confuse those examining it. Both parliament and the public had to be given time to study the budget thoroughly. Pressure from Government to rush through the process must be resisted. Consequently, parliamentarians must insist that pre-budget hearings be held, involving the country's key stakeholders. Such hearings must be open to the public or broadcast live. Through new information technology, it was possible to gather the views of large numbers of people in a short time. Campaigns must be mounted to raise awareness of how the budget is being spent, particularly in countries with a high level of illiteracy.

> Today bureaucracy and unaccountability seem to prevail over democracy. Italy has surrendered its monetary sovereignty by joining the euro, not its political sovereignty, but now we are ruled by an unelected Government. Lagarde, Draghi, Barroso: they have never been elected, at least not to their present positions; even Sarkozy and Merkel have not been elected to govern Italy. How can believers in democracy remain silent at this outrage?
>
> Senator Antonio Martino, Italy

53. For parliamentarians to fulfil their task of scrutinizing the budget, parliaments should have a standing committee on financial and budgetary affairs. Such a committee should be chaired by a member of the opposition, a practice that was already being followed in some countries. However, the opposition should not use the budget hearings to try to make short-term political gains. To be effective, such committees must have the power to subpoena people and documents. They also had to be provided with adequate resources. There should be a regular review of how they function and improvements should be made where necessary. In parallel with a "general-purpose" budget committee, it might be advantageous to establish specialized parliamentary committees, or rapporteurs, to monitor specific ministries' fields of activity, or to concentrate on certain particularly challenging budget-related issues such as official development assistance, which was often handled by several ministries and was thus difficult to track.

54. Other requirements needed to be fulfilled to ensure that the oversight role was genuine and not just a mere formality. Mechanisms must be in place to ensure that any doubts or questions about the budget raised by the opposition could not be simply vetoed by the Government, thereby negating the oversight role of parliament. Where parliamentary oversight took the form of questions to ministers, the latter must be compelled to give real answers and not just platitudes.

55. The key findings of session II were the following:

- There is a clear need for a global budget transparency standard for all parliaments to follow in order to ensure democratic accountability. However, it should not be expected that all parliaments, regardless of their level of development, will be able to meet such standards without adequate time and resources.
- Examination of a highly transparent but cumbersome budget process pointed to the need for a more stringent budget process that was also more accessible to ordinary people.
- Even where parliaments have the legal authority to exercise appropriate budget oversight, lack of capacity often prevents them from doing so. Oversight capacities can be enhanced by ensuring the independence of auditor reports, establishing parliamentary budget offices, making more time available for parliaments to review the budget proposal, disclosing the Government proposal to the public, holding public hearings and publishing "citizens' budgets" to help people understand how their money is spent.

- Parliaments are increasingly losing control of the budget process as more and more unelected bureaucracies impose their standards for fiscal, monetary and other economic policies on duly elected Governments and parliaments. In order for the budget process to be politically accountable, parliament's authority vis-à-vis these bureaucracies be restored.

- In some countries, certain funds — frequently external aid or oil revenues — are not recorded in the budget and are not scrutinized by parliamentarians. There was general agreement that such lack of oversight is dangerous.

- In examining the budget, parliamentarians must not only concentrate on appropriations but also think about the sources of the country's income. Countries that are recipients of large amounts of development assistance find it difficult to come to terms with the fact that donors are also running short of money. This makes it all the more important for parliamentarians to question where money is coming from and how it is being spent, in order to try to find ways to reduce the country's dependency on aid.

Session IV. Strengthening the links between national institutions and civil society: towards more open societies

Panellists: Ranko Krivokapić, Speaker of the Parliament of Montenegro; A. K. Abdul Momen, Permanent Representative of Bangladesh to the United Nations; Corinne Woods, Director, United Nations Millennium Campaign; Jeffery Huffines, United Nations Representative of CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation; Evelyn Leopold, former Bureau Chief, Reuters, acting as moderator.

56. At the session, Mr. Krivokapić examined the political role of civil society, while Ambassador Momen focused more on its role in development. Ms. Woods talked about the role of civil society in achieving the Millennium Development Goals and Mr. Huffines offered a general socio-political view of the question.

57. Respect for the law and its uniform application had long been recognized as prerequisites for building the trust of citizens in State institutions. The State must guarantee fairness to its citizens and they in turn must respond with trust in the institutions. The fundamental duty of the public official was to commit him/herself to the public good, regardless of whether the official was from the legislative, executive or judicial branch of Government.

58. Partnership among democratically elected authorities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), media and citizens was a fundamental principle of an open society, with civil society functioning as an organized autonomous voice of the public. In particular, it could act as a counterweight to collusion between politicians and bureaucrats which, although possibly quite unwitting, could potentially carry the seeds of corruption. However, the activities of NGOs could not replace legal and constitutional authority because a democratic structure of power was necessary to guarantee observance of human rights, enforcement of accountability and personal responsibility. That being said, an NGO might well be able to partner with the State to help provide cheaper and faster public services.

> Freedom does not exist if it is not guaranteed by the State, but only the State controlled by the citizens can offer a true feeling of freedom.
>
> Ranko Krivokapić

59. The Balkans had demonstrated that the fall of one system did not necessarily result in a better one, but could lead to periods of great instability. That sustainable democratization took a lot of time and effort was a very important lesson for those involved in the changes in the Arab world.

60. Bangladesh had a vibrant and well-organized civil society and its organizations contributed significantly to the advancement of various sectors of the population, in particular women, children and vulnerable groups. The Government strongly encouraged the involvement of NGOs in development activities both locally and centrally, and its development initiatives had a "human face" precisely because of civil society engagement in the process of achieving sustainable economic growth, peace and development. While the constitutional and statutory laws provided for protection of fundamental freedoms and human rights, civil society acted as a watchdog to ensure their fair implementation. The vigilance of civil society had contributed positively in the field of safeguarding human rights, reducing corruption, promoting women's political participation, even-handed law-enforcement and pro-people decision-making.

61. Partnerships between civil society and national institutions required the creation of a culture of openness, accountability and representativeness in which each side respected the criticism and suggestions of the other and cooperated to create stronger democracies. Non-governmental organizations that were funded by foreign agencies or were acting on behalf of a specific interest group needed to review their position and strike a balance between the interests of their funding organizations or interest group and the national interest. For NGOs to be seen as acting in the general interest, it was important that they should not be too closely associated with any political party, whether in power or in opposition.

62. National institutions would be able to fulfil their mandates only when there was a strong and vibrant civil society ready to provide support. It was important for all stakeholders to participate in national development, as that promoted ownership and accountability in achieving common goals.

> The Millennium Development Goals provide a framework; new technology provides an opportunity.
>
> Corinne Woods

63. The achievement of a global undertaking such as the Millennium Development Goals hinged upon an important factor that was beyond technical expertise: political will. It was in the space created by the global commitment to achieve a vision such as the United Nations Millennium Declaration that the links between national institutions and civil society could be strengthened, by means of a constructive

citizen-State engagement process. National institutions planned and delivered services, but ensuring their effectiveness required feedback on their quality. At the local level, awareness had to be created to ensure citizens' confidence in and commitment to that feedback process. Modern communications technologies could help facilitate citizens' feedback, transmitting their voices directly rather than mediated through the organizational layer of an NGO. Such technologies also offered possibilities for interaction between citizens and national institutions upon which the foundations of the post-2015 framework for achieving the Goals could and should be built.

64. The Arab Spring and the Occupy Wall Street movement had sprung from social movements that were contained within a new sphere, rather than from organized NGOs, which could become obsolete. It was futile to try to define how to interact with traditional NGOs as the nature of civil society was changing. Parliamentarians should instead focus on what forms citizen participation could take in the immediate future. There might be a need for new institutional processes or frameworks to be set up by parliaments for the purpose of engaging with civil society in the new and less structured paradigm.

65. Looking at the situation of civil society at the end of 2011, the United Nations representative of CIVICUS said that the heady optimism of the 1990s that had followed the fall of the Berlin wall and its promise of a global wave of democracy and freedom was followed by a decade during which the war on terror was used as an excuse to restrict freedom of information, expression and assembly.

66. Even the financial implosion of 2008 and the resultant economic and fiscal crises had not yielded significant changes, as Governments deemed banks too big to fail and citizens too small to matter. The financial crises had exacerbated the pressures on civil society, the erosion of political support for the interests of "the other" and the prioritization of economic interests over human rights and political freedoms.

67. The seismic shift in geopolitical equations meant that countries that had been champions of democracy and human rights became more willing to turn a blind eye to violations if the States perpetrating them were important sources of capital or resources. Between 2009 and 2010, CIVICUS had tracked 90 countries that changed laws or policies intended to rein in civil society, representing a concerted criminalization of dissent.

68. In 2011, the Arab Spring had renewed faith in citizen action around the world and catalysed citizen movements such as Occupy Wall Street, as the people often labelled "ordinary citizens" finally lost patience with being trapped between States that did not listen and markets that did not care.

> One definition of civil society is that it is the sum of institutions, organizations and individuals located between the family, the State and the market, in which people associate voluntarily to advance common interests.
>
> Jeffery Huffines

69. Those popular movements were challenging the conventional definitions of State, market and civil society and the relations between them. They were resisting the imposition by stealth of new social contracts that reduced civil society to low-cost providers of public services rather than advocates for the excluded and watchdogs over the exercise of power. They were challenging definitions of national sovereignty that had already become blurred by global threats such as climate change, pandemics and terrorism. Empowered by new technologies, they were radically redefining norms of accountability and participation. They were united in their fluid, horizontal forms of organization and their use of new technologies was helping them reclaim an active voice in governance.

70. In the run-up to the United Nations review of the Millennium Development Goals in 2013, CIVICUS and other organizations were seeking to engage citizens worldwide in national debates about the kind of world they wanted. The question was how civil society and parliaments could work together to address the democratic deficit and poor distribution of power at the global level so that the voices of all citizens could be heard.

71. In the discussion following the panellists' remarks, several delegates described the frameworks in their countries within which NGOs interacted with the Government. It was suggested that while the developing world faced the problem of a lack of communication between parliamentarians and civil society, the developed world was struggling with unequal access by civil society to parliamentarians owing to the activities of lobbyists and special interest groups that distorted that relationship by means of financial contributions. A fundamental question was therefore how interaction among parliamentarians, political leaders and civil society could be enhanced, bypassing the groups that had their own exclusive interests. The answer seemed to lie in the creation of an institutional framework within the parliamentary system. For example, the parliamentary committees on any given issue should reserve some space for civil society to advance its views on important national issues. Mutual respect was fundamental, whether or not there was agreement on the views expressed.

72. While citizen participation should be welcomed, some participants warned against having too idealistic a view of civil society. In some cases, NGOs were working to undermine, by non-democratic means, the Government or the parliament. There were also cases where they were corrupt and lacked accountability mechanisms. Caution should be exercised in determining which groups were recognized as civil society, and who and what they represented. Clarity was needed in the laws governing civil society organizations, the composition of their governing bodies and their rules and statutes.

73. Other speakers suggested that there were many international NGOs operating in dozens of countries, which meant that foreign funding of NGOs was neither a novelty nor necessarily a bad thing. It was important for NGOs supported by foreign funding to abide by national laws and, in particular, to refrain from taking measures that might incite political violence. A code of conduct should be developed to frame the activities of the representatives of the various organizations and to regulate their financing. That was a task for parliamentarians, who had to craft laws that would ensure that civil society, like Government, was accountable. At the same time, it was the responsibility of Government to defend the rights to free speech and assembly, including for those expressing dissent and criticism.

74. The key findings of session IV were the following:

- Strengthening the relationship between national institutions and civil society is the basis for sustainable democracies. Not all countries develop at the same speed, but all countries have to move in the same direction.
- Civil society can only function effectively when the State cooperates in a spirit of partnership. It is up to national parliaments to establish a strong legal framework to ensure constructive dialogue, as well as accountability and transparency of civil society organizations.
- New technology may make civil society organizations obsolete, as citizens can organize themselves without an organizational intermediary. Parliamentarians need to seize the opportunities created by these new technologies and reach out to citizens in order to improve dialogue. It is up to parliamentarians to ensure that civil society is not trapped between States that do not listen and markets that do not care.

Summary of the meeting and closing remarks

75. Anders B. Johnsson, Secretary-General of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, thanked all the participants for their valuable contributions. Following the presentation of the summaries from the four main sessions of the parliamentary hearing, he stressed that the recommendations for action made by IPU would be submitted to its governing bodies for consideration of the best way to implement them. He added that in early 2012, the General Assembly was due to hold a special debate on interaction and cooperation between the United Nations, national parliaments and IPU. Parliamentarians clearly had a huge stake in the outcome of that debate and, consequently, IPU would invite them to take part in a discussion on the related issues that will take place in the lead-up to, and during, the IPU Assembly to be held in Kampala in March/April 2012. The thoughts expressed during the present parliamentary hearing would feed into that discussion, with the aim of developing a shared understanding of the way forward towards creating a stronger engagement between the United Nations, parliaments and IPU.